


# Question remains who will pay for Willamette River cleanup

Created on Thursday, 17 December 2015 05:14 | Written by [Joseph Gallivan](#) | 

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Cleaning up 100 years of toxic sludge in the Willamette riverbed could cost anything from tens of millions to a couple of billion dollars, according to experts.

However, who will pay for the costly cleanup, no one knows yet.

Interested parties on a panel called "Portland Harbor Superfund Cleanup: What it means for every Oregonian" agreed Monday that the price tag may not be settled, but the date of the big decision is. The panel met during the Oregon Business Plan Leadership Summit on Monday in Portland.

A cleanup plan for the Portland Harbor Superfund Site will be proposed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2016. In 2000 the Willamette River from the Steel Bridge to the confluence with the Columbia River was declared a superfund site.

Panelist Nick Fish, commissioner with the city of Portland, took pains to clarify that the city has disclaimed any liability: It is not yet legally on the hook for anything. Since many businesses that caused the pollution are long gone, the partial buck may stop with government bodies.

"The water bureau, BES (Bureau of Environmental Services) and the Fire Bureau have all owned land along the river, and also owned the conduits that people put bad things into, for example the sewers," he said, adding the city would certainly share its liability once it has figured out the source.

Dick Pedersen, director of the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, said that in March or early April 2016 the EPA will complete a feasibility study which will bring some cost perspective. Then there will be a 60-day public comment period. And in the summer and fall the EPA will come to a record of decision by the end of 2016.

Fish said his agencies have to balance a healthy watershed with a healthy working harbor. He said there are 40,000 middle-income, blue-collar jobs dependent on the river.

"Can we get to a deal? Is it practical?" Fish asked. He cautioned against setting the bar too high. "If we can't reach an agreement it will be another 15 years of superfund and it will be litigated."

He added that with "staggering numbers coming from the EPA," prices ranging from \$790 million to \$2.5 billion, "We are looking at cost-effective solutions. But cost effective is not cost benefit, and it doesn't necessarily look at our ability to pay."

Sandra McDonough, president of the Portland Business Alliance, cautioned against running up a huge bill and sticking it to the businesses along the river.

"We need an agreement everyone can get with. It would be sad for the business community if we spend 15 years talking about it."

She mentioned the high-end \$2 billion figure, which involves what Oregon Sen. Betsy Johnson, speaking earlier in the day at the conference, dismissed as "making it so clean you could conduct surgery on the river bed."

And who will pay for it?

"Some say big oil companies? There are 150 responsible parties, those costs are being shared broadly," McDonough said. Many of these are companies that make things, she said, such as rail cars and ships. "Sixty percent of those jobs are quality, middle-income jobs, and 76 percent do not need a college education."

And because some companies are out of business, she sees much of the bill ending up on utility bills.

Work is expected to take a decade, as the window for working on the river is only three months a year, and neighbors will probably not put up with 24-7 work.

U.S. Rep. Kurt Schrader also was on the panel. "I'm a little worried as a veterinarian and a scientist that we should use good science. This harbor is safer than many that have been cleaned up. You can swim in that river and eat the native fish ... There are hot spots," he said meaning more polluted areas.

But Schrader didn't think the buried contamination was a health hazard worth paying a lot of money to remove.

Fish pointed out that given the money involved, the issue is surprisingly not on people's radar. "I've had zero feedback from the public," he said. He recommended the EPA take the public comment period very seriously to hear a range of voices. Otherwise, "You're likely to have just a small number of groups that weigh in, and I'm growing weary of the conflict between those groups. The public is not served by constantly having a blue-green fight."

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